

Project Title: A 'Third Possibility' Revolution: The Success of Émigré Reporting Networks at Radio Free Europe During Poland's 1956 Thaw

Section Title: "Aligning American Administrators and Polish Opinion: Radio Free Europe Station Policy in the Wake of the 1956 Poznań Riots"

Frances Cayton, Midwest Slavic Conference Panel Presentation

The following is a section of the second chapter of my three-chapter honors thesis, which I defended in March 2018 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this thesis, I argue that Polish émigré journalists at Radio Free Europe were essential to the station's mission and Polish broadcasts throughout the first part of the 1950s, culminating in the 1956 thaw. The first chapter focuses on how American interests gave way to Polish voices at Radio Free Europe throughout the early 1950s. Here, I examine the relationship between the Polish listenership and Polish émigré community. Establishing the importance of Polish émigré reporters to the station's mission, I recreate the "information loop" through which information on life and politics in Poland both entered and exited the country. Turning to the June 1956 Poznań riots, the second chapter, which I will discuss today, argues that Polish émigré journalists and Poles in Poland drew on a collective national consciousness to advocate for gradual communist reform. In this chapter I delve into Polish fears of Soviet military intervention, noting how the Polish community remained apprehensive of pursuing violent revolution. I also outline the process by which American administrators ceded authority to Polish journalists during the riots. The third and final chapter focuses on how Radio Free Europe's 'by Poles, for Poles' reporting policy assisted the success of Gomułka's thaw.

The Poznań Riots

A shrill bell pierced the early morning Poznań air on June 28, 1956. Having agreed upon the Stalin Locomotive Plant's 6:30 AM siren as the signal to start their protest, workers made their way to the city center in droves. The trams were not running, with one striker leaving a note attached to the first tram scheduled to depart proclaiming "Tram drivers' general strike. We are not driving today."¹ An anonymous strike committee claimed responsibility for the coordinated effort, with somewhere between 70 percent to 80 percent of the city's workers protesting. Chanting "we want to live like human beings," pleas for bread and freedom rang out across the crowd.² The protesters attacked the jail and released prisoners, hijacked the government's radio-jamming headquarters, and took arms outside of the security police's headquarters. The rioting did not end until the government's infantry and tanks entered the city, killing somewhere between 400 and 600 of the 30,000 workers who participated in the protest.³

While coordinated by working-class Poles, the protests integrated disgruntled members from all strata of Poznań society. Official statistics from the Committee for Public Security noted that 79 percent of those arrested in the protest were workers, while 15 percent of those arrested were students. Though many were anti-communists, the protesters also included many PZPR members, with somewhere between 40 percent and 50 percent of party members employed in Poznań factories joining the strike.⁴

Protesters comprised a wide-ranging swath of the population, mirroring the wide range of Polish Radio Free Europe listeners. It is important to consider that, just as with the Poznań riots,

18. Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*, 98.

19. Ibid, 99-100.

20. "The Poznań Riots: A Brief Chronology of Events," Folder 6, Box 17, Arch Puddington Collection, The Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Palo Alto, California.

21. Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*, 118-119.

Radio Free Europe enjoyed support from both party and non-party members. In letters to the station many listeners identified themselves as party members, demonstrating that there was an existing cohort of PZPR members protesting the government prior to Poznań.⁵ This was corroborated by a Polish soldier who defected and testified with Radio Free Europe that “the Communists, themselves, listen to the Western Stations.”⁶ Demonstrating the station’s centrality to daily life in Poland, this soldier noted that even though only about 10 percent of the population owned radios, news from RFE spread so fast that “whenever I mentioned some news item to my friends, they knew about it. The same was true of my parents, although they have no radios in the village.”⁷ These listener and defector testimonies serve as reminders of the centrality of Radio Free Europe to life in Poland. Including both average workers and PZPR members of all ages, the station’s listeners reflected the diverse population participating in the Poznań protest.

Chief among the protesters’ goals was attacking the government’s radio jamming equipment. This equipment was used to block RFE and other Western broadcasts from entering Polish airwaves. In destroying the equipment, protesters signaled their support for Western radio by increasing the range for RFE broadcasts. In describing the protest, station reporters noted broken jammers in the middle of the road, “shattered to smithereens [sic] and being trodden underfoot by the crowds.”⁸ These reporters added that some of the “most powerful” jamming equipment used to block “anti-regime broadcasts from Radio Free Europe” was being “hurled out of the windows of the radio station.”⁹ Disenchanted protesters viewed radio jamming as an

22. Letter from “Piorun” to Radio Free Europe, undated, Folder 559, Box 171, Frank Altschul Papers.

23. “Report on an Interview with Polish Defector, January 1954,” Folder 62, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

24. “Report on an Interview with Polish Defector, January 1954,” Folder 62, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

25. Teletype message from Walter Wagner to Egan, Walker, Galantiere, and Dunning, June 30, 1956, Folder 10, Box 17, Arch Puddington Collection.

26. Ibid.

unnecessary waste of government resources. Feeling as though the money spent on radio jamming detracted from that available for food, one protester pointed at a destroyed jammer before commenting “four million zloty it cost, and I get no bread.”¹⁰ Whether out of support for Radio Free Europe, or just in an act of opposition to the government, the Poznań protesters increased the station’s broadcast range by destroying the jammers.

American Administrator’s Initial Reaction to Poznań

The United States and Radio Free Europe’s American leadership were initially indecisive on how to react to the Poznań protests. First opting to over-emphasize the protests’ revolutionary potential, American administrators initially intended to use the protests as a mechanism for rapidly securing a democratic Poland. It was only in listening to the station’s Polish reporters that administrators were eventually persuaded to take a more gradualist approach to Polish politics in the station’s broadcasting. This gradualist approach would align with the reformist policies supported by the Poznań protesters.¹¹

Upon first hearing about the protests, American administrators did not know how to react. Until this point, Radio Free Europe largely operated as a venue for passive resistance to the regime. In the face of Poznań, American administrators did not have a cohesive vision for what the station’s role would be during times of active resistance. The upper echelon of the station’s leadership asked newly appointed Station Director W.J. Conover Egan, questioning “when do we cease to be a home service, a purveyor of political pep talks, etc. and become a revolutionary instrument?”¹² Egan and other administrators wavered between supporting the protests and

27. “The Poznań Events: Information Bulletin,” September 1956, Folder 46, Box 2, Register of the Free Europe Press Issuances, The Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Palo Alto, California.

28. Puddington, 93.

29. Letter from Stuart L. Hannon to W.J. Conover Egan, June 30, 1956, Folder 10, Box 17, Arch Puddington Collection.

encouraging the riots, or passively sitting back and allowing the protests to unfold. In this uncertainty, the station's administration developed their response to the anti-communist action in real-time as the Poznań riots unfolded.

American administrators' initial confusion with how to manage Poznań can be explained by their distanced relationship with the Polish people. Throughout Spring 1956 American administrators focused their efforts on larger trends in Eastern Europe, concentrating station bandwidth on disseminating Khrushchev's Secret Speech, which had occurred earlier that year.¹³ Operating at a birds-eye view throughout the 1950s, American administrators were out of touch with Polish public sentiment. To this end, American leadership failed to acknowledge at least four workers strikes that occurred in Poland prior to those in Poznań.¹⁴ The station did not publicly address nor endorse these strikes until the riots in Poznań, which were too significant to ignore.¹⁵ Admitting that they were "not aware" of these other strikes until Poznań, American administrators proved blindsided by the scope of public discontent demonstrated in the Poznań riots.¹⁶ It was Poznań that forced the station to pay attention to Polish public opinion at the ground level. In response to Poznań, American leadership released a bulletin outlining both low- and high-profile anti-communist protests from Siberia to East Germany from the previous three years.¹⁷ With this bulletin, station leadership demonstrated a renewed interest in local strikes and Polish public opinion. This shift demonstrated the previous distance between station administrators and Polish reporters, who themselves had been aware of earlier strikes but were not previously able to draw the administrators' attention to them.

30. Puddington, 92-93.

31. Teletype from Walter Wagner to Egan, Walker, Galantiere, and Dunning, July 3, 1956, Folder 2, Box 18, Arch Puddington Collection.

32. "Bulletin #1135, Soviet Bloc Uprisings," June 29, 1956, Folder 14, Box 39, Imre Kovacs Papers.

33. Teletype from Walter Wagner to Egan, Walker, Galantiere, and Dunning, July 3, 1956, Folder 2, Box 18, Arch Puddington Collection.

34. "Bulletin #1135, Soviet Bloc Uprisings," June 29, 1956, Folder 14, Box 39, Imre Kovacs Papers.

Despite an initial lack of clarity on the station's role during protests, American leadership used Poznań as an opportunity to push for a "free Poland." Viewing the destruction of jamming equipment as a validation of Radio Free Europe, American leadership vowed to "exploit the dynamic Polish justification of RFE's existence."¹⁸ In his first plan for the station's response to Poznań, RFE Deputy Program Director Stuart L. Hannon urged the station to "endorse the strike" and "do everything in the scope of our imagination" to support the protests.¹⁹ Ranging from requests for Poland to accept American food provisions, to urging the Polish government to grant guarantees against brutality and hunger, Hannon and the station's leadership aimed to place the station at the center of the quest for Polish liberation.²⁰ The State Department echoed the station's request, and on June 29 it determined to restore "political freedom" in Poland.²¹ This statement reinforced Hannon's propagandistic approach toward the riots, using Poznań as the starting point for a broader campaign for democracy in Poland. It is only in considering the American administration's initial ignorance of Polish public opinion and previous protests in Poland that the station's original ad-hoc approach to promoting liberation can be considered. Only by listening to Polish émigré reporters did these station administrators truly begin to understand Polish public opinion, and thereby develop a stronger broadcasting policy following Poznań.

The Munich Desk and Émigré Responses

Witnessing the American administration's liberation rhetoric, the Polish émigré community critiqued the administration's desire to use Poznań for propaganda purposes. The émigré

35. Letter from Stuart L. Hannon to W.J. Conover Egan, June 30, 1956, Folder 10, Box 17, Arch Puddington Collection.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Elie Abel, "U.S. Urges Soviet Free Satellites," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1956, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

community, including Poles at Radio Free Europe, hoped for the Poznań riots to secure reforms of communism. Joseph Sulkowski, a Poznań native and professor at Catholic University, wrote an op-ed to the *New York Times* criticizing the American government's response to the Poznań riots. Commenting that Washington aimed to "play up the significance of the Poznań riots and to use them as an argument in the cold war against the Soviet Union," Sulkowski followed that the State Department erroneously connected "the Poznań riots with the broader issue of liberating Poland and other countries from Soviet control."²²

Many Poles, both in and outside of Poland, viewed the events in Poznań as a revolt against Soviet-style communism, but not as a complete rejection of Poland's communist regime. One defector noted to the station that, while upset about the economic status of life in Poland, "Poles don't want to fight Poles, even if they hate the Communists. Maybe it would be different if the Russians actually occupied our country. But physically, they do not."²³ This statement aligned with the language of the protesters, who used mostly anti-Soviet language, instead of anti-communist or anti-Polish wording.²⁴ This is significant, as it demonstrates that, while the Poznań protesters pushed for reform, neither Poles inside Poland nor those who had emigrated viewed the revolts as anti-communist. Instead, to these Poles, the revolts aimed to secure reforms within Polish communism and provided an opportunity to distance themselves from the Soviet Union. For these Poles, the riots were not the full "anti-communist" push for "political freedom" that the United States hoped for.²⁵

39. Joseph Sulkowski, Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, June 30, 1956, Folder 36, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

40. "Report on an Interview with Polish Defector, January 1954," Folder 62, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

41. Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*, 127.

42. Elie Abel, "U.S. Urges Soviet Free Satellites," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1956, Folder 36, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

Surprised by the Poznań riots, the émigré Poles at Radio Free Europe argued for a policy of gradualism when reporting the riots. This response aligned with that of the émigré community more broadly, with both Polish émigré reporters and other émigré Poles in the West advocating for communist reforms without an overhaul of communism itself. Polish journalists at Radio Free Europe remained wary of the potential for a violent armed conflict, a fact that surprised American administrators. Administrators questioned why the Polish journalists “asked themselves whether the thaw had not already gone too far; but, when after a few days, it became clear that the regime was yielding to demands of the people, confidence returned.”²⁶

It required the testimony of former Polish President Stanislaw Mikolajczyk to explain Polish émigré hesitancy toward hardline anticommunism to the Americans. While Mikolajczyk explicitly opposed communism in Poland, he represented the more pragmatic voice of Polish émigrés at-large to the House Committee on Un-American Activities.²⁷ Testifying that the Polish people “know, however, that they have the Russians to the east, inside Poland, and in the west,” Mikolajczyk asserted that Polish émigrés and Poles in Poland were afraid of being invaded by the Soviet Union if the revolts gained more traction.²⁸ Due to their distance from Polish public opinion, American administrators could not grasp the full extent of the Polish community’s fear of invasion. It was only through listening to émigré reporters that station administrators realized the extent of Polish opposition toward using the protests as a platform for full liberation.

43. William Griffith “Memorandum: Policy Review of the Voice of Free Poland Programming,” December 5, 1957, Paul Henze Papers, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

44. Founded in 1938 and disbanded in 1976, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was a Cold War-era congressional committee in the United States that aimed to investigate the “character, and objects of un-American activities” and examine “un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries.” For more information on the committee’s work, see Charles E. Schamel, “RECORDS OF THE HOUSE UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES COMMITTEE, 1945-1969,” July 1995, Preliminary Inventories for Special, Select, and Joint Committees, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

45. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities, “Testimony of Stanislaw Mikolajczyk,” November 17, 1956, Folder 2, Box 77, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk Papers.

As outsiders at the station, émigré sources were often unaware of the divisions between émigré journalists and American administrators. In testimonies with the station, these émigré sources shared candidly that they were wary of Soviet intervention. Prior to the events in Poznań, one defector noted that there were limits to Radio Free Europe's ability to promote democracy in Poland. Warning the station of these limits, this defector noted "I don't think that RFE can make us risk our lives."²⁹ While not in Poland, and therefore not facing a direct threat to his life, this defector's comment points at a broader issue of Polish national consciousness. In many ways, these Polish émigrés shared a "community of fate" with Poles in Poland. While in some cases this included family and friends still in Poland, this shared fate also expanded to include a common national identity.³⁰ Sharing the experiences of invasion and devastation during World War II, this "community of fate" cannot be ignored as a potential motivating factor behind the fear of conflict escalating.

It is within this "community of fate" that Polish Desk Editor Jan Nowak lobbied on behalf of Polish interests during the Poznań riots. Declaring "Poles are the best experts on Poland," Nowak urged American administrators to reconsider their position on Polish émigré input.³¹ While granting that the goal of "full freedom and full democracy" was noble and valid, Nowak maintained that this goal could only be achieved through "less propagandistic" messaging that prioritized the "team of exiles (...) studying daily all events and changes in their country."³² The Polish "community of fate" was the natural antithesis to the American

46. "Report on an Interview with Polish Defector, January 1954," Folder 62, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

47. "Report on an Interview with Polish Defector, January 1954," Folder 62, Radio Free Europe Collection, Fonds No. 36.

48. Letter from Jan Nowak to Program Director William Rafael, August 11, 1956, Folder 456, Box 162, Frank Altschul Papers.

49. Letter from Jan Nowak to Program Director William Rafael, August 11, 1956, Folder 456, Box 162, Frank Altschul Papers.

propagandistic approach to liberation from communism. Rooted in Polish identity and shared experience, it was this community that allowed émigré journalists and sources to better understand the potential repercussions that could come from the Poznań riots.

An Attentive Administration: Shift in Station Policy

Paying closer attention to Polish public sentiment and émigré recommendations, the station's administration eventually granted émigré reporters and the Munich desk more leeway in reporting the thaw. With Nowak, Mikolajczyk, and defector testimonies reiterating the importance of gradualist messaging, American administrators soon realized that the most promising path was one of promoting "liberalization rather than liberation."³³ Shifting from top-down guidance to deferring to the input of émigré reporters, the American administration "offered tremendous leverage to those engaged in broadcasting to Poland."³⁴ Acknowledging the success of this Poles-first broadcasting method, one American administrator noted that the tone of scripts "was that of one who knew and understood his audience because he himself felt a sense of complete identification with them. These were Poles broadcasting to Poles: one cannot read these scripts without feeling that speaker and listener were in accord."³⁵ Trusting Polish émigrés that the best path to a free Poland was through gradual reform, the station steered away from programming that could promote further bloodshed.³⁶

American and émigré researchers partnered to produce a number of internal reports on the Poznań riots to inform broadcasts. These memos heavily featured anecdotes from Poles and excerpts from Polish media broadcasts. The main report on the protests, published almost a full

50. Puddington, 93.

51. William Griffith "Memorandum: Policy Review of the Voice of Free Poland Programming," December 5, 1957, Paul Henze Papers.

52. William Griffith "Memorandum: Policy Review of the Voice of Free Poland Programming," December 5, 1957, Paul Henze Papers.

53. Johnson, 83.

month after the strike, accurately reflects Poles' dissatisfaction with Soviet-style communism, low wages, and poor living conditions in Poland. Signaling the Station's deference to Polish sentiments, the report included quotations from the protesters themselves. Concluding that Poland could make a "model, independent 'socialist' state," this statement reflected the station's shift away from the State Department's initial desire to use the protests to liberate Poland.³⁷ In acknowledging the potential for reformed communism in Poland, the report demonstrated the station's newfound prioritization of Polish voices.

These Polish émigré-dominated scripts enjoyed success with listeners, serving as the basis for a more cohesive Polish-first policy at the station. Station administration increasingly took note of how well émigré reporters understood Polish public opinion. With this, American administrators lauded the positive "effect of Poles here of [sic] American policy guidances."³⁸ Seeking out more Polish sources, the Radio Free Europe's director and deputy director urged lower-level American administrators to yield to Polish needs. Strongly recommending that reporters place "dramatic emphasis on Polish peoples [sic] demand for food," these directives reflect how even upper-level administrators paid attention to Polish wishes as they coordinated broadcast policy.³⁹

When recapping the events in Poznań at the NATO Defense College, Munich-based American researcher Paul Henze attributed the success of the events in Poland to Polish nationalism. Acknowledging the Polish desire for communist reform and general distrust of the Soviet system, Henze noted that the "metamorphosis" in Poland was rooted in a "contagious"

54. Free Europe Press Plans and Analysis Division "Poznań, The Background" July 24, 1956

55. William Griffith "Memorandum: Policy Review of the Voice of Free Poland Programming," December 5, 1957, Paul Henze Papers.

56. Telegram from W.J. Conoverly Egan and Stuart L. Hannon to Rafael, Bell, Bernard, July 2, 1956, Folder 2, Box 18, Arch Puddington Collection.

Polish nationalism. Henze furthered that through this nationalism, “communism in Poland has become more Polish than communist.”⁴⁰ Henze’s use of the Poles’ nationalist reformist framework to discuss Poznań demonstrates the degree to which Polish philosophy permeated the station’s understanding of the June riots.

Hitting at a central discussion emerging within Polish anti-Soviet dissident circles at the time, Henze acknowledges a Polish desire to pursue, what one Pole described as, its “own Polish road.”⁴¹ While this “Polish road” may not be a nationalist communist regime in the style of Yugoslavia, the Poznań riots reiterated the extent of Polish support for destalinization. In viewing these developments, American administrators at Radio Free Europe eventually ceded authority to Jan Nowak and Polish journalists. Opting for a policy of gradualism that provided an “opportunity to expand Poland’s margin of freedom,” Radio Free Europe successfully inserted itself into the center of conversations on communist reform in Poland.⁴²

57. Paul Henze, “Recent Developments in Eastern Europe,” December 14, 1956, Folder 5, Box 27, Paul Henze Papers.

58. Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*, 83.

59. Puddington, 95.